

June 8, 2008

## **Editorial: Prison should include rehabilitation, punishment**

Periodically, a letter shows up in the programs office at Caddo Correctional Center declaring the jail's substance abuse treatment programs changed someone's life. A former prisoner is living clean and sober.

Other times, letters come from other Louisiana prisons asking for help. There, the prisoner doesn't have access to treatment programs but realizes he or she needs it.

About 80 percent of the inmates in Louisiana prisons have a substance abuse problem that contributed to their crimes: it could be possession of a large quantity, theft in order to buy more or sometimes violent crime.

It doesn't take much of a leap in logic to say treating substance abuse issues in prison could decrease crime and recidivism rates. Statistics abound:

- Of the 13,000 inmates in state prisons who have been identified as having a substance abuse problem, less than 7,000 are receiving treatment.
- 49 percent of inmates were high or intoxicated when they committed their crimes, according to a 2002 study.
- The same study found 82 percent of those in prison with addictions were nonviolent offenders.

Addiction is certainly no excuse for breaking the law, and even nonviolent criminals should be punished. But rehabilitation to prevent further, more serious crimes is also part of the Corrections Department's mission statement.

Several projects are in the works to add rehabilitation components to prisons, and they deserve the support of state government.

Rep. Roy Burrell has two bills asking for studies of this very issue. And Caddo Sheriff Steve Prator hopes to expand his programs to the state prisoners held at Caddo Correctional.

"We are slowly realizing it doesn't help society to incarcerate without any rehabilitation," Burrell said.

The first of his studies, which is waiting on a Senate vote, would research providing substance abuse treatment in all jails and prisons in the state. We encourage lawmakers to approve the resolution.

His second study, already approved, will examine sentencing provisions that emphasize rehabilitation.

They rose out of concerns about overcrowded prisons and recidivism rates. Of the prisoners released in 2002, half were back in prison by the end of 2007.

And of those who return with a new charge, 41 percent go back because of a drug-related crime.

To Michael Duffy, assistant secretary of the Office for Addictive Disorders, this is an easy place for his department to offer help. He has already launched a \$13.4 million program to help prisoners re-enter society and maintain sobriety.

"We have a public health issue that we have not appropriately addressed, and it becomes a public safety issue."

Caddo Correctional offers one potentially model program. It has designated 78 beds for men enrolled in the "therapeutic community." It requires them to exercise as a group twice a week and attend group sessions four days a week. Once they complete the program, they can help facilitate for newcomers.

If they don't take it seriously or don't follow the rules, it's back to general population. The program has 115 names on a waiting list.

"We hope they can experience a different way of life," said David Boone, manager of inmate programs at Caddo Correctional. "We try to teach them how to deal with their emotions — shame, sadness, guilt."

Right now, all those prisoners are unsentenced, so the motivation to be involved could be more about getting a break from a judge, but Boone is OK with that. He trusts that some of it sinks in and, if nothing else, those prisoners are better behaved than others.

Boone's next goal is to have a similar unit for the sentenced, state prisoners housed at the jail. While state prisons all have some sort of substance abuse program, the Corrections Department is looking into how many jails — which house 45 percent of state prisoners — offer the programs.

"I want to build something like nowhere else in the state," Boone said.

He envisions a place for the first-time, nonviolent drug offender where they could be sentenced to treatment and work release. That would also leave prison space open for violent criminals.

Corrections Secretary Jimmy LeBlanc isn't entirely sure about the practicalities of that sort of alternative sentencing but is convinced treatment prior to re-entry is critical. "We have those we will never fix, but we have those who never had the opportunity. I want to provide an opportunity."

The programs should also take into account the need for help once prisoners are released, whether through halfway houses, faith-based programs or other nonprofits.

"You can have the finest treatment program behind bars, but this is a chronic, relapseable illness. And if you don't have support in place, it is extremely difficult to stay clean and sober," Duffy said.

These studies are the first step to getting the funding necessary to meet that goal. Both should be completed before the 2009 legislative session and should be full of compelling statistics that make the case for expanded treatment.

Will it be expensive? Probably, but it would be spending up front that would lead to long-term savings in trying and incarcerating repeat offenders.

With administration officials behind the effort, Burrell feels confident progress can be made on reform for prisoners and the system.

"Need to represent the people that sent me and do something that will fix something instead of put Band-Aids on it," he said.

Sadly, Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the country. We should at least have a model system that shows punishment and rehabilitation can go together.